

## Chapter IV

### URBAN REGIONS OF NORTH BENGAL

Almost every urban centre has some sort of influence on its surrounding region in respect of its urban activities. The region thus commanded or being dependent upon that urban centre is called the urban region or hinterland of that urban centre. The domain of the term "urban region" is so vast that it includes everything from the mere production of surplus food to the latest cultural pursuits like newspapers, etc. The application of the term urban region has a limitation i.e., it is limited to a certain distance from the parent urban centre. Of course, this limitation varies according to the servicing capacity of the urban centre and the degree of the accessibility in the form of transportation network between the urban centre and the rest. Thus the urban region of all the urban centres is not same in total area and it varies subject to the resourcefulness of that region as well as of the urban centre.

Every urban centre has a relationship with its surrounding rural areas and with the passage of time, a demand for a new socio-geographical unit in the place of the existing administrative unit develops. This socio-geographical unit is known as the urban region which develops on the basis of an exchange-service relationship between the urban and the rural areas, often crossing the administrative boundaries of each. As any urban centre ( town/city)

is a product originating from the rural-surplus, the urban region is not the product of any planner or architect; rather it exists within the society, and the interrelationship between any urban settlement and its surrounding area is a matter of serious consideration for the modern social sciences. The English poet John Donne wrote "No man is an island". Man as a social animal has to depend upon others for many things. Similarly, the city and its intimate region or a town and the surrounding rural areas, being his place of inhabitation, become dependent on each other on bilateral terms where a 'give and take policy' is active. Beside, this interrelationship can not be measured by quantitative methods alone, rather it would require a search for cultural inter-links, which is characteristically a qualitative aspect.

In discussing urban region Smalles (1963)<sup>(1)</sup> wrote "when within any urban area, we recognize, industrial belts, shopping areas, residential quarters and such like, we are expressing the internal structure of the towns in terms of different uses of urban land. It can also be described in terms of the physical forms and arrangement of the spaces and buildings that compose the urban landscape or town scape, as it may be called. Differences in either or both these intimately related aspects of urban morphology, function and form, give a basis for the recognition of urban region"<sup>(a)</sup> He has sub-grouped these urban regions, follows : (a) The core;

(b) The integuments; (c) Azonal factors; and (d) Enclave".

Precisely, smalles tried to confined the urban region within a city and not beyond it. While according to Dickenson (1964)<sup>2</sup> "every urban settlement, large and small, is in some degree a headquarters of trade and institutions, for the very essence of urban character is the provision of goods and services for a tributary area" and "among the basic activities, which are mainly industrial in character -- though they may well include other activities such as commerce, finance, administration recreation (tourism) and education ..... there are some activities which mainly serve and draw from a more or less extended and continuous area around the urban centre, the range of association depending on the nature of the goods or service and on the competition of neighbouring centres. The term, trade area, sphere of influence, hinterland (German, the land behind), umland (German, the land around), and urban field are variously used to define this area". In other words, according to Dickinson, a city always has a region which is dependent on the city for economic, cultural, social, entertainment and administrative purposes, where the city/town itself becoming the focussing centre of the activities of the surrounding region.

The concept of urban region is thus, based on a flow of functions between the urban and the rural areas has been described

by social scientists as the Rural-Urban interrelationship. In fact, no town is a parasite since it renders at least some non-agricultural services to the rural people, while the urbanities have to depend upon the rural people for their food as they do not grow their own. As a result, an interrelationship harmonises the urban-rural link, leading towards social solidarity. This solidarity has been furthered by speedy communication systems. The societies of the pre-industrial age obviously could not enjoy such a situation. The close links between the rural areas and this has largely been due to the improved communication networks, leaving no area far beyond contact. The development of communication, apart from increasing accessibility, has also minimised the distance or journey-hours from the rural areas to the towns/cities, and the easier accessibility has brought the urban areas, with their modern urban amenities and entertainments, to the reach of the villagers. The country people have developed a sense of material needs, and for these, they visit the neighbouring urban centres, located within a 1 to 2 hour journey. The shops offering clothings, utensils and various other daily necessities, the institutions offering medical and educational facilities, which are available in the urban centres, are a great attraction for the villagers, who feel a greater urge to visit the towns: Above all, the cultural link between the urban and the rural areas is an important

~~described~~ factor in the growth of the urban region. The rural culture usually differs from an urban culture. The basic economic-occupational difference and the age-old traditional conventions and superstitions have kept the rural areas far away from modern civilisation, which is particularly true in countries like ours. The urban centres, being the seat of modern cultural activities, have a role in indoctrinating the rural folk as well as associating them with the modern way of life. The modern transportation has brought the rural areas culturally close to the urban centres.

It is however, quite a difficult job to demarcate the urban regions in an area where urban development is still at a low level, and such is the case of North Bengal, where out of the total population only 9.26 percent are urban and 90.74 percent are rural (Census of India - 1971), and where no large industrial complex has grown up yet except the tea gardens, which are mainly located away from the urban centres, having no direct impact on the urban growth of this region. In spite of that, some sort of urban region is bound to be slowly taking shape with the increasing importance of administrative centres mainly the district headquarters based on the improvement of transport networks resulting in the beginning of a trend to <sup>the</sup> hierarchy of urban centres of this region. The region under study has some similarities, indicated by

Nonn (1975)<sup>(3)</sup> in his article "Concerning the Notion of 'Sub-Region: The French Case". This is in respect of the service facilities available in the towns, irrespective of their size, and insufficiency of a hierarchical organization. In fact, the urban centres of North Bengal, being the product of a colonial setup, had administration as their main function and in the absence of a good transportation network, they could not extend their sphere of influence into the countryside for a long time. It is a very recent phenomenon, particularly of less than two decades (1950-1970), that the road network has developed to a considerable extent and brought the urban centres into close contact with their surrounding rural areas, thus integrating them into inter-dependent units.

#### The Present Urban Condition of North Bengal for the development of Urban Regions

While discussing the present urban condition of North Bengal, one should keep in mind that the present urban setup of North Bengal is the product of externally imposed systems which had been initiated by the British, and thus is characteristically colonial. During the British rule in India, the region got some administrative importance and for that reason a few administrative centres were

created, which subsequently increased their functions and populations and brought some more centres into existence. Administration as a function is still playing a major role in the urban development of this region. But the remoteness from the heartland of commercial and industrial activity mainly centred in and around Calcutta, the existence of a slow and insufficient transportation network and the presence of a primarily subsistence agricultural practice over the whole region, have together given rise to a very low-grade urbanization which can better be described as "subsistence urbanization"<sup>(4)</sup> (Breese, 1969). Most of the people are still living in an environment providing either limited urban facilities or none at all. In essence, 'subsistence urbanization' indicates an urban condition where the urban centres are mainly confined within their own limits, containing very limited service capacity for the surrounding region. Out of the 28 urban centres (Census of India 1971), representing barely 9.26 percent of the total population of the region, only a few have got commercial importance, and the lack of large industrial activities has limited the scope of employment, the latter being mainly confined to the white collar services. As a result the urban centres have failed to make any remarkable imprint on their surrounding countryside. Besides, a good number of places which have been declared as urban centres display no such urban potentialities for which the people of the

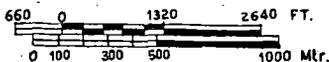
surrounding countryside can depend on them. Only the administrative headquarters have some influence on their surroundings and, as exceptions, one or two urban centres, because of their nodal position (like Siliguri and Raiganj), attract people from their surroundings and far beyond. Otherwise, most of the towns of North Bengal are so tiny in their size and function that they can hardly meet the commercial needs of their people. As a result, the background for the development of urban regions remained weak. The little commercial interaction and the lack of occupational opportunities became two main bottlenecks in the growth of a defined urban region. The present urban conditions do not help the growth of urban regions as in the western countries, where the maximum commercial interaction between the rural and the urban centres are conducive to the growth of them. Besides, the region under study lacks any big city or metropolis which can cater to the needs of a large population. Most of the towns of North Bengal belong to the category of fifth to third order towns in respect of their population-size. But a few of them, which are either administrative headquarters of the districts or big commercial centres, have extended their sphere of influence, often to beyond their administrative jurisdictions. Thus, an urban region based on administrative and commercial activities is slowly emerging in a number of instances. The present urban condition which prevails over North Bengal, like any other region of a

developing country, presents some differences from the type of urbanization which we witness in the advanced countries. These differences can be summarised as (1) differences in the forces inducing urbanization; (2) differences in the ratio of population to resources and levels of living; and (3) differences in the basic outlook and value-systems.

### The Urban Regions in North Bengal

Keeping the background mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, the 9.26 percent urban population has some direct or indirect relationship with their surrounding countryside, which consists of 90.74 percent rural population. Since most of the urban centres have developed as administrative centres, the urban region or hinterland of an urban centre generally extends to the limit of its administrative or judicial jurisdiction. It should be borne in mind that people hardly come for the purpose of marketing alone. In fact the purpose of marketing is always there even when the villager visits the town for either judicial or administrative purposes. On the other hand, the purpose of visiting a commercial town is generally motivated by commercial needs, but these types of market centres or commercial towns are rare. The existing rural areas of North Bengal are so backward that except for a few grocer, shops and

# ROAD MAP OF MALDA TOWN



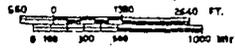
*Reference*

|                     |     |  |
|---------------------|-----|--|
| National Highway    | --- |  |
| State Highway       | --- |  |
| Major District Road | --- |  |
| Other District Road | --- |  |
| Village Road        | --- |  |
| Bridge              | --- |  |
| Ferry               | --- |  |

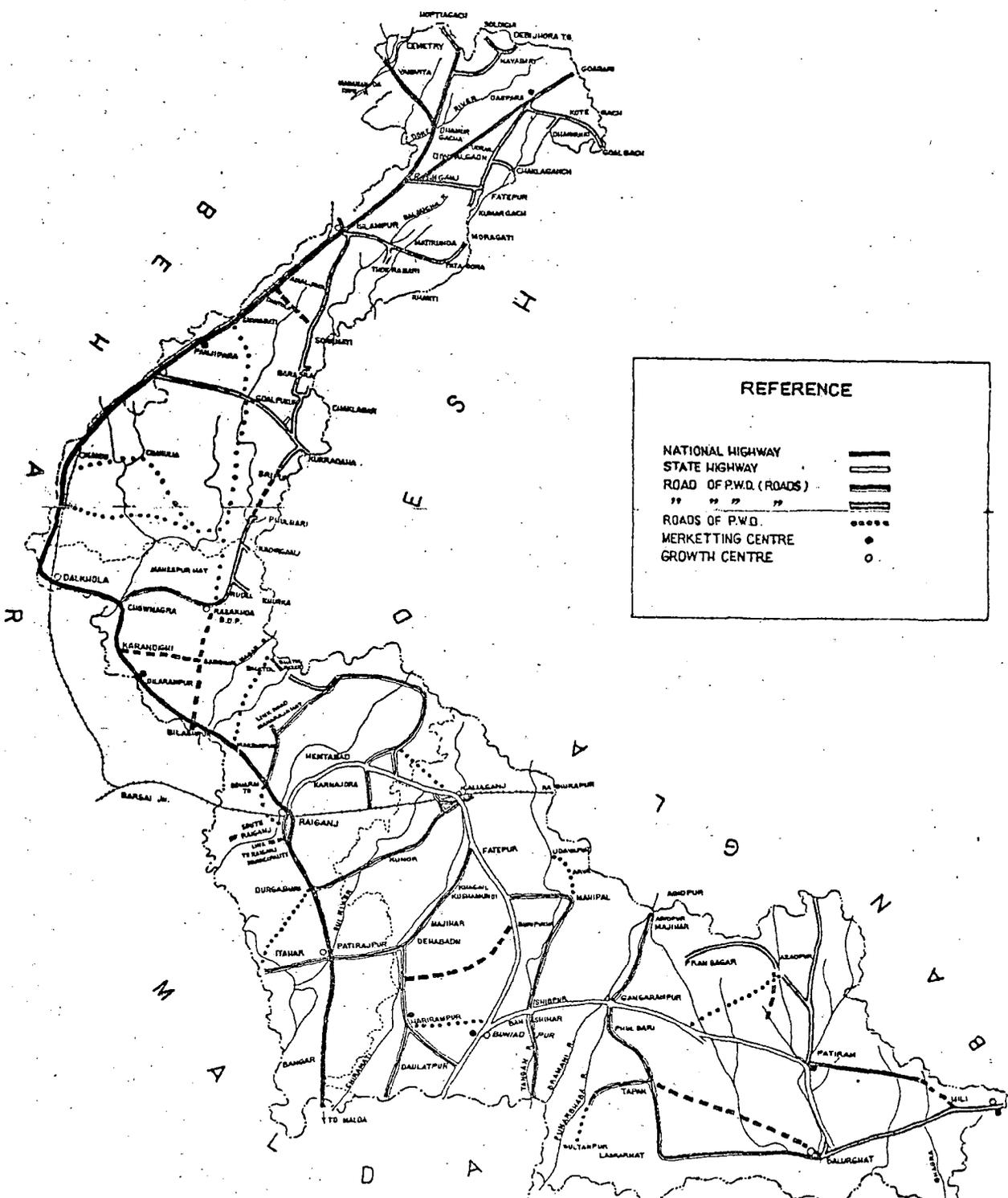


other types of small shops, one would find no other commercial units. Thus for most of his needs, a villager must go to a nearby urban centre. Besides, for the health services and higher education like High Schools or Colleges, villagers have to go to the nearest urban centre where at least a primary health centre and at least a middle or high school are located. For major medical treatment, the villagers have to go to the district hospitals located in the district towns. In short, the rural people have no other alternative but to depend upon the urban centres for services like administration, judicial affairs, health, education, markets and entertainment. Such degree of dependence increases further with those urban centres which are district or sub-divisional towns, because whatever development has taken place in the region that has mainly become concentrated in those urban centres. As the degree of interaction between the urban and the rural centres depends upon the rate of accessibility, the towns with better transportational network have greater spheres of influence upon their countryside. In fact, in North Bengal the transportation is too poor so far as the railways are concerned. Only one railway line i.e. the Northeast Frontier Railway, runs through this region and, having a few local trains running between certain urban centres, serves the villagers very little when they often feel the necessity of visiting the near-by town, particularly for different types of services. Besides, these trains run twice daily - once in the morning at the office-hours and

# ROAD MAP OF WEST DINAJPUR DISTRICT



DARJEELING



**REFERENCE**

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| NATIONAL HIGHWAY       |  |
| STATE HIGHWAY          |  |
| ROAD OF P.W.D. (ROADS) |  |
| " " " " "              |  |
| ROADS OF P.W.D.        |  |
| MERKETING CENTRE       |  |
| GROWTH CENTRE          |  |

BANGLA DESH

then in the afternoon. The train-service, therefore, meets only the needs of the service-holders and students who come to the district town or other towns everyday at a certain hour. People from the rural areas usually travel by buses plying between different urban and semi-urban centres at definite intervals. The road-network has developed in the region linking almost all the urban centres with their surrounding countryside and, particularly, the National Highway 31, running from north to south, touches almost all the important towns of this region. As a result people depend more on the bus-services than on other means of transportation. The air-service as far as it exists, is mainly for Calcutta and has no impact on the growth of the urban regions.

Thus, it is only the bus-services which can determine the rate of interaction between the urban and the rural areas, and with the help of bus-services one can identify the urban region of any urban centre of North Bengal since it is the roadways through which the urban influences funnel out into their hinterlands. For this purpose the most important factor that has to be taken into consideration is the intensity of bus-services in respect of number of trips to surrounding regions. The more the number of trips, the more it will lead towards a better urban rural unison in all spheres of life, making an outlet for the out-flow of urban goods and in-flow of rural products, which ultimately help in the transformation

of human attitudes, behavioural patterns and social value-systems. In other words, road-transportation in North Bengal is slowly bringing the outer rural areas in to close contact with the urban centres.

### Method of Data Collection

In order to analyse the bus-services and their impact on the growth of the existing urban regions in North Bengal, data have been collected from all the urban centres by an "origin-to-destination" method, i.e. how many buses ply daily from one originating centre to its surrounding region, and, where they go. Based on the data, the map showing the bus-service-frequency has been prepared. Further, to define the actual urban regions, the inter-district or inter-state express-bus-services have been eliminated, as they do not serve the actual needs of inward-outward movement between the urban and the rural areas. Two inter-district bus-services, however, included are Siliguri-Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar-Alipurduar, because they have a direct impact upon the four urban centres in respect of trade, services and marketing.

### Data Analysis

The map (No 17), showing the bus-service frequency of North



Bengal, reveals that the interaction between the urban and the rural areas is maximum along certain routes and minimum along other routes. Another important fact which the map presents is that only a few centres have command over their surrounding regions.

The routes along which urban-rural interactions is maximum are (1) Siliguri - Bagdogra, with extension upto Maxalbari; (2) Darjeeling - Kalimpong; (3) Jalpaiguri - Maynaguri - Dhupguri; (4) Cooch Behar - Tufanganj - Buxirhat; (5) Cooch Behar - Dinhata; (6) English Bazar - Menikchak - Mathurpur Chain; (7) Balurghat - Hili; (8) Balurghat - Kaliaganj; (9) Raiganj - <sup>K</sup>Maran<sup>a</sup>ejhora; (10) Raiganj - Itahar.

Minor interactions are mainly concentrated along (1) Darjeeling and its surrounding region, including important settlements like Sukhiapokhri, Mirik, Bijanbari, Mungpoo, etc. (2) Jalpaiguri and its surrounding Doorgs region, including semiurban centres like Gayarkata, Birpara, Dalgaon, Banarhat, Madarihat, Malbazar, Metali, etc; (3) Cooch Behar - Mathabhanga, including Pundibari, Nishiganj; (4) Raiganj and its surrounding area, including large settlements like Bishmupur, Kaliaganj, Kerandighi, Hemtabad; (5) Islampur - Dalkhola (6) Islampur - Daspara, etc.

Along the Siliguri - Bagdogra route, the buses make more than one hundred trips perday, including up and down services. Actually the entire region from Kharibari to Siliguri depends on

Siliguri for various services, of which market and judiciary needs make the most important part. Siliguri offers a larger market than any other town of this area and the impact of Siliguri both as a commercial centre as well as a transportation - terminal for both the railways and roadways is increasing day by day. The influence of Siliguri upon its surrounding region as a terminal apoint has extended beyond its administrative jurisdiction. People, even from Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, have to come to Siliguri to avail of the Mail train from New Jalpaiguri Railway Junction, located near by Siliguri town. This is one of the biggest important reilway junctions of the Eastern India, having all the three broad, metre and narrow gauge railway lines, maintaining direct links with the Darjeeling Hills on the one hand, and the plains beyond the State, on the east and west. In the district of Jalpaiguri, the maximum interaction takes place along the Jalpaiguri - Maynaguri - Dhapguri route, giving rise to heavy traffic between the town of Jalpaiguri and the outlying centres as well as rural settlements, from where people come to the district town every day, mainly for judicial or administrative or educational (for higher learning like, colleges, etc.) purposes. Jalpaiguri, with its large market, caters to the needs of a larger area than the sub-divisional headquarters Alipurduar, which also attracts people from its own surrounding rural areas for the same reasons. Cooch Behar, being a district town, is the only

urban centre which has a visible sphere of influence upon its surrounding region served by the Cooch Behar - Rufanganj - Buxirhat route and the Cooch Behar - Dinhata route, by which people come to Cooch Behar for judicial, administrative, health, education and marketing. Besides, a good number of job-holders and students mostly going to colleges, travel daily from the neighbouring areas to Cooch Behar Town. Similarly English Bazar, the district town of Malda district, extends its sphere of influence along the Englishbazar - Manikchak - Mathurpur route, and in the district of West Dinajpur, the Balurghat - Hili, Balurghat - Kallaganj, Raiganj - Karnajhora, Raiganj Itahar are the main bus-routes along which the maximum urban-rural interaction takes place. The purposes of visits of the hinterland people to Englishbazar, Balurghat and Raiganj are the same as in the other district and sub-divisional towns of North Bengal i.e. the hospitals, educational institutions and the markets attract people from the outlying distant areas. In fact, very few people come for entertainment, as most of the large settlements have at least one cinema hall however small it may be and actually rural people are so poor that it is beyond their capacity to bear on expenditure for this purpose. Only on special occasions like religious festivals, etc. the rural folk come in groups to visit the town. This happens during the main Hindu Festivals, especially when thousands of ruralites visit the towns like Siliguri, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, etc.,

for going to the Puja-Pandals, where the deities are placed on exquisitely-built platforms.

But-service frequency of the next order is found in the case of Darjeeling which, as a district town, commands its surrounding region, consisting of centres like Bijanbari, Sukhiapokhari, Mirik, Mungpoo, etc., from where the green vegetables, poultry products and milk come to the district town, while the rural folk come to purchase readymade garments, stationary goods and for entertainments. The frequency is also rather small between the town of Jalpaiguri and the Duars area. Cooch Behar - Mathabhanga or Cooch Behar Nishiganj reveals less frequency since people from these centres come to the district town mainly for administrative and judicial purposes. Raiganj, as a commercial and administrative centre, has developed some sort of sphere of influence on the area lying around it. The people of the surrounding countryside depend on Raiganj for its larger market, greater medical facilities and the like. The region served by Raiganj town includes important settlements like Bishnupur, Katiaganj, Karandighi, Hentabad, and Itahar. Islampur, another sub-divisional town, enjoys a hinterland because of its administrative and judicial activities.

The foregoing analysis reveals that the centres which have developed a trade area or hinterland or urban region, are mainly administrative headquarters, like district towns such as Darjeeling,

Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Balurghat and English Bazar, and Sub-divisional towns such as Siliguri, Raiganj, Alipurduar, Islampur, etc. On the other hand, a good number of urban centres including some sub-divisional towns, are playing a negative role in this respect. As has already been mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, the activities of the latter group are mainly confined within their own local administrative limits and have remained at too a low level to come into the use of the people living in their surrounding countryside. The other characteristics of the urban regions of North Bengal towns may be summarised as follows : (i) Most of the towns have urban regions limited within the respective district boundary; (ii) The administrative and market potentialities are the two main factors which have given impetus to the growth in existing urban regions in North Bengal; (iii) In most cases, the journey from the parent town to the surrounding centres or vice-versa, is of one to two hours duration, and rarely is over two-and-a-half hours.

CHAPTER-IV

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